



## Comprehensive Trail Strategy: Information Sheet

### Why Complete a Comprehensive Trail Plan?

The Green Mountain National Forest (GMNF) encompasses approximately 50 percent of the public land within Vermont. As such, the Forest Service serves a role in connecting our publics with natural landscapes, public land management, and recreation and stewardship opportunities. National Forest System Trails are the arteries into the heart of the GMNF and are a major component of the recreation program where our recreation niche focuses on providing trail-based activities in backcountry settings. With an estimated 2.5 million annual visitors to the GMNF, trails are increasingly identified as a travel destination where people can enjoy recreating on foot, bicycle, horse, snowmobile, or ski. Trails are valued for contributing to the physical, mental, and spiritual health of individuals in addition to providing socio-economic contributions to local communities and businesses.

Managing National Forest System trails is increasingly challenging as trail budgets fluctuate, visitor use remains high, and trail construction standards for safety and resource protection continue to increase. The future success of sustainable trail management relies on the thoughtful evaluation of trail networks and projects. The Forest Service initiated this Forest-wide Comprehensive Trail Strategy process to provide guidance and recommendations for the sustainable management of non-motorized and motorized trails on the GMNF. The Strategy identifies: trail management issues; suggested future management actions for trails; and processes that can be used to resolve or address future trail concerns.

The purpose of the Strategy is to: enable the Forest Service to efficiently and effectively respond to stakeholder requests; address capacity concerns; and comply with the 2006 GMNF Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) Goal #12 stating, “complete comprehensive trail planning for 100 percent of the Forest.” Also, the Strategy enables the Forest Service to continue ongoing public discussions following the State-wide Trail Collaborative process.

#### The Goals of the Comprehensive Trail Strategy Include:

- Identify a sustainable trail system by reviewing potential adjustments to the GMNF trail system.
- Develop a process for evaluating ongoing and future trail issues, including a process that can be used to resolve or address trail concerns.
- Explore opportunities to connect Forest Service system trails with those on adjacent public lands, such as town features, State Parks, and National Parks.
- Develop a means of continuing the collaborative public process with opportunities for feedback, information exchange, and accomplishment reporting.
- Update the agency trails databases, identify missing data, and collect information on trail locations and conditions.

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## Trail Planning Process

The following steps outline the ongoing process for the Comprehensive Trail Strategy:

### 1. Data Clean-Up

The first step in completing the Comprehensive Trail Strategy required the Forest Service to assess the condition of our trail data, address inaccuracies, and provide the most accurate information to date to inform the process. Trail information in our database of record was reviewed to identify:

- Missing system trails, such as those that had undergone environmental analysis and had been constructed, but were never entered into the trail database of record
- Accuracy of the existing trail information, such as what uses each trail is managed for
- Accuracy of the geographic/spatial data compared to actual ground conditions
- Identification of non-system trail locations

### 2. Internal Trail Evaluation

After the trail data was reviewed and improved, an internal review of the trail network was completed. This evaluation was developed considering three tiers of sustainability: social, environmental and financial. Every GMNF National Forest System trail was evaluated based on the following criteria:

- Managed Uses (hike, bike, ski, snowmobile, equestrian)
- Relative Use Levels/Duplicate Trail Opportunities
- Safety Concerns
- Resource Concerns
- Maintenance Concerns
- Purpose (leads to vista, loop, to services, etc.)
- Alignment with Forest Plan
- Recent maintenance and financial investments

### 3. Draft Internal Suggestions for Long-term Trail Sustainability

Based on the trail evaluations, a draft action was identified for each trail. Suggestions identify trails that may be: potentially needed, potentially not needed, maintained trails as part of a Special Use Permit only, expand or reduce managed uses on the trail, or maintain trails at status quo.

### 4. Public Collaboration

Now that an internal analysis has been completed, the Forest Service is seeking your public input. It is the responsibility of the Forest Service to foster open, productive communication with trail users, and interested stakeholders. Towards that end, the Forest Service is asking the public to review draft suggestions for future trail actions, provide feedback on issues, and to identify specific ideas for the GMNF trail system.

### 5. Next Steps

The Forest Service will analyze public feedback, balancing comments from the public meetings with Strategy objectives, Forest Service trail management direction, Forest Plan standards, and Forest goals. A final Strategy with Recommended Trail Actions will be issued. The final step will be to implement the Trail Strategy over time.

The Comprehensive Trail Strategy is not a Decision document. Decisions regarding the implementation of specific proposals or actions will be made through the appropriate National Environmental Policy Act process.

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